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# WOMEN'S SPEECH: SEPARATE BUT UNEQUAL?

Cheris Kramer

IN generalizing about sex differences, Margaret Mead says that although societies differ in the way traits are assigned to men and women, all cultures set up societal norms for the sexes which go beyond the biological differences.<sup>1</sup> There continues to be disagreement, of course, on which behavioral differences are caused by cultural influence and which by biological characteristics. For researchers in speech and linguistics, however, the first task is to search for possible differences in the ways men and women speak.

Although there have recently been published a number of articles dealing with sexism in the English language (for example, the use of the dominant "he" meaning either male or female), there has been relatively little concern about the ways men and women use the English language differently. The sex role differences, so important to our culture, seem to have been largely ignored in communication research.

We need to consider not only the possibility of differences in grammatical, phonological, and semantic aspects, but also possible differences in the verbal skills, instrumental use of language, and the relationship of non-verbal uses to verbal behavior. We need to ask if there are differences between the sexes in their linguistic competence. Do women control some speech structures or vocabulary

that men lack or vice versa? We need to ask if there are differences in linguistic performance. Are there syntactic structures, vocabulary, phonological rules that, say, women might know but not use while men both know and use?

This paper will consider the evidence for there being systems of co-occurring, sex-linked, linguistic signals in the United States.<sup>2</sup> There are, of course, very important implications of such a finding for future linguistic research. Discussion of possible reasons for sex-related differences in speech will be limited; the emphasis will be on, first, what type of research in linguistic sex contrasts has been done and then on relevant material in folk-linguistics (with suggestions of further areas of study).

It has been easier to see the differences of language between the sexes in other cultures than in our own. For example, Furley says that sex contrasts in language usage are common among primitive tribes (though such contrasts are, he says, "barely discernible in the familiar languages of Europe"). He reports differences in phonetics, grammar, and vocabulary found in tribes in Siberia, Bengal, Bolivia, the United States (Indians), and the Lesser Antilles. There is, he writes, "linguistic evidence that in at least some scattered instances, the existence of these distinctions is associated with an assertion of masculine superiority."<sup>3</sup> Haas indicates that differences

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Mead, *Male and Female* (New York: William Morrow, 1949), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Dickerson has suggested that the term "genderlects" be used to describe such systems. Braj Kachru has suggested "sexlects."

<sup>3</sup> Paul Furley, "Men's and Women's Languages," *The American Catholic Sociological Review*, 5 (Oct. 1944), 218-23.

in the language spoken by men and women are common to many cultures. Although differences in grammar have been noticed, most differences seem to be either of vocabulary or of pronunciation.<sup>4</sup>

Frazer writes about the special speech used by the women of the Caffres of South Africa. A Caffre wife must not pronounce the names of her father-in-law or the names of her mate's male relations in the ascending line, or words which contain a syllable of any of those names. In the case of the Caffres, avoiding the emphatic syllable contained in many male names means that many words used by the women have a syllable changed and at times the entire words. Frazer's source states that the Caffres call this language "Ukuteta Kwabafazi" ("women's speech"). Restrictions are evidently often imposed on the males of a tribe also.<sup>5</sup>

Jespersen warns that differing lists of words restricted to either men or women do not necessarily make different languages. In his chapter "The Woman," he quotes Rochefort speaking of his experiences in the seventeenth century among the Caribbeans: "The men have a great many expressions peculiar to them, which the women understand but never pronounce themselves. On the other hand, the women have words and phrases which the men never use, or they would be laughed to scorn. Thus it happens that in their conversations it often seems as if women had another language than the men."<sup>6</sup> Rochefort is saying that these systems are exclusive. There are categorical differences. Women have

words which the men *never* use. However, in the United States many differences appear to be a matter of context and frequency; for example: women perhaps know but do not use swear or curse words in the same context or with the same frequency as men. By the same token, women seem to use such words as "pretty," "cute," "lovely," and "oh dear" in contexts and in frequencies that differ from men.

In a 1969 article Shuy reviewed some of the small amount of research which had been done on women's speech in the United States. He mentions a Detroit study by Shuy himself, Wolfram, and Riley, that found clear sex differences in frequency of a linguistic feature. For example, males used "-in" (in place of "-ing") 62.2 per cent of the time compared to only 28.9 per cent of the time by females. (In a New England study, Fischer found that girls used "-ing" more frequently, while boys used "-in" more frequently.<sup>7</sup>) Shuy also reported that Wolfram in his work with Black English found that black females "have fewer *f*, *t* or  $\emptyset$  realizations of *th*. . . . Females come closer than males at approximating the norm." Black females show greater tendency toward norms in their grammar, also, especially black females of the lower middle class.<sup>8</sup>

Labov also found that lower middle class New York women have a more extreme pattern of hypercorrection than men in the same class.<sup>9</sup> Levine and Crockett found in a study of one American community that it was primarily the

<sup>4</sup> Mary R. Haas, "Men's and Women's Speech in Koasati," in *Language in Culture and Society*, ed. Dell Hymes (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 230-231.

<sup>5</sup> J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, I (London: Macmillan, 1900), 404-441.

<sup>6</sup> Otto Jespersen, *Language: Its Nature, Development, and Origin* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1922), p. 237.

<sup>7</sup> John L. Fischer, "Social Influences on the Choice of a Linguistic Variant," in *Language in Culture and Society*, p. 484.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Shuy, "Sex as a Factor in Sociolinguistic Research," Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C., 1969. (Mimeographed.)

<sup>9</sup> William Labov, *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966), pp. 310-314.

middle class women who led the community toward the national speech norms.<sup>10</sup> Trudgill found the same type of sex differentiation for speakers of urban British English. His study demonstrated that "women informants . . . use forms associated with the prestige standard more frequently than men." His study also discovered that male speakers place a high value on working class non-standard speech. He offers several possible reasons for the finding that the women are more likely to use forms considered correct: (1) The subordinate position of women in English and American societies makes it "more necessary for women to secure their social status linguistically"; and (2) While man can be rated socially on what they *do*, women may be rated primarily on how they *appear*—so their speech is more important.<sup>11</sup>

Another study discovered, in tests involving boys and girls, that even when there is no difference in articulatory mechanism size, the sex of the speaker can be accurately identified from his or her speech. The researchers offered some possible reasons for this finding, one of which was:

If there is no average difference in articulatory mechanism size, the differences we have observed could arise from differential use of the anatomy. The children could be learning culturally determined patterns that are viewed as appropriate for each sex. Within the limit of his anatomy, a speaker could change the format pattern by pronouncing vowels with phonetic variations, or by changing the configuration of the lips. . . . Spreading the lips will shorten the vocal tract, and raise the formants. The characteristic way some women have of talking and

smiling at the same time would have just this effect.<sup>12</sup>

Goldberg conducted an experiment which found that women college students are predisposed to value the scholarly writings of men in their professional fields over the writing of women in the same fields.<sup>13</sup>

Kester found that in a mixed group of people it is the men who talk much more than the women. She found that men interrupt women more often than women interrupt men.<sup>14</sup> In a study involving a verbal task, Wood concluded that men tended to use more words than women in responding to a given stimulus.<sup>15</sup>

Another study, done by Shuy, Baratz, and Wolfram in 1969, tested men's and women's subjective reactions to language performance, and found only an insignificant difference in men's and women's ability to identify the race of speakers heard on tape. Considering that his earlier study (that I have mentioned) had shown clear sex contrasts in language use, with women using the prestige forms more often than men, Shuy found the results of this later study surprising. He gives several possible reasons for the evidence that subjective reactions and performance in speech are asymmetrical, including the disappointing final one that "women continue to be one of

<sup>12</sup> Jacqueline Sachs, Philip Lieberman, and Donna Erickson, "Anatomical and Cultural Determinants of Male and Female Speech," in *Language Attitudes: Current Trends and Prospects*, ed. Roger Shuy and Ralph Fasold (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown Univ. Press, 1973), pp. 74-84.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Goldberg, "Are Women Prejudiced against Woman?" *Trans-action*, 5 (Apr. 1968), 28-30.

<sup>14</sup> Judy Kester, mentioned in "In Other Words," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 7 May 1972. Another comment on this subject is made by Connie E. Eble, "How the Speech of Some Is More Equal than Others," Univ. of North Carolina (mimeographed).

<sup>15</sup> Marion Wood, "The Influence of Sex and Knowledge of Communication Effectiveness on Spontaneous Speech," *Word*, 22 (Apr.-Aug.-Dec. 1966), 112-137.

<sup>10</sup> Lewis Levine and Harry J. Crockett, Jr., "Speech Variation in a Piedmont Community: Postvocalic r," in *Explorations in Sociolinguistics*, ed. Stanley Lieberman (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), pp. 76-98, *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Trudgill, "Sex, Covert Prestige, and Linguistic Change in the Urban British English of Norwich," *Language in Society*, 1 (Oct. 1972), 179-195.

the mysteries of the universe" (Shuy, pp. 12-14). This reaction in itself offers a possible reason that so little research has been done. Firestone calls such a reaction part of an "exaggeration process" that provides for stereotyping of women as a peculiar type of human being that cannot be understood or treated by the laws that govern mankind, i.e., males.<sup>16</sup>

I could find few other studies dealing with linguistic sex contrasts in English. There have been some published papers on the ratio of male to female stutterers. There is general agreement that there are more male stutterers than female. Here again, there is disagreement about whether biological or social factors are working. Some scholars have found evidence that stuttering is a hereditary trait but recent studies indicate that a male is more likely to stutter than a female because our culture places more importance on speech fluency in males than speech fluency in females. Conscious of the pressure on him to speak well, the male feels more insecure about his speech.<sup>17</sup>

A number of publications deal with sex-related differences in comprehension and retention of oral messages. Although early studies found that males comprehend more than females in tests using oral messages, a recent study did not find this result. The authors of the recent study conclude that the inconsistent findings of this type of research "demonstrate that the role of sex in communication has not been clearly defined. Further research should provide added insight into the role of sex in influencing communication effects, a problem which no researcher employing both males and fe-

males in communication research can ignore."<sup>18</sup>

Experiments dealing with possible sex-related differences in comprehension of compressed speech and in persuasibility show the same conflict in results.<sup>19</sup> There is evidently some factor or factors which have not been controlled in these tests.

I have mentioned, then, some of the few types of research projects which have been designed to find sex-related differences in speech. This is not to say that there has been no other work on the subject. The next section of my paper will try to pull together what can be called the folk-linguistics (using Hoenigswald's term)<sup>20</sup> of women's speech. Much can be said about the popular beliefs of what constitutes women's speech. These beliefs are not always articulated as beliefs, but from a reading of etiquette manuals, speech books, cartoons, and novels, a stereotype of the woman as having particular characteristics of speech will emerge. Sometimes belief is confused with fact. While researching this paper I became aware that there seems to be a conflict not only between what women's speech really is like and what people think women's speech really is like, but also between what people think women's speech is like and what they think it should be like.

Females are cautioned against talking too much. *The New Seventeen Book of*

<sup>16</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), p. 100.

<sup>17</sup> See Ronald Goldman, "Cultural Influences on the Sex Ratio in the Incidence of Stuttering," *American Anthropologist*, 69 (Feb. 1967), 78-81.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Kibler, Larry Barker, and Donald Cegala, "Effect of Sex on Comprehension and Retention," *Speech Monographs*, 37 (Nov. 1970), 287-292.

<sup>19</sup> Sally McCracken, "Comprehension for Immediate Recall of Time-Compressed Speech as a Function of the Sex and Level of Activation of the Listener" (abstract), *Speech Monographs*, 36 (Aug. 1969), 308-309. Robert N. Bostrom and Alan P. Kemp, "Type of Speech, Sex of Speaker, and Sex of Subject as Factors Influencing Persuasion," *Central States Speech Journal*, 20 (Win. 1969), 245-251.

<sup>20</sup> Henry M. Hoenigswald, "A Proposal for the Study of Folk-Linguistics," in *Sociolinguistics*, ed. William Bright (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), pp. 16-20.

*Etiquette and Young Living* described in a 1972 *New Yorker* advertisement as "AN IDEAL GRADUATION GIFT" ("social confidence for girls starts here") gives the "basic rules of conduct" for young girls who are interested in learning to "fit in." The book makes reference to a "survey of opinions" collected from boys. Some of these opinions, given as support for guidelines for girls, mention speech: "I hate girls who can't stop talking." "I like a girl who talks—but not a whole lot." "I like girls who listen to me without interrupting and who pay attention." The editor adds some comments in support of the boys' opinions: "Concentrate on the other person. Ask questions to draw him out. He'll love talking about himself." "Everybody loves to hear praise, and boys in particular." "Any male is happy to be the source of information."<sup>21</sup>

Girls are not *supposed* to talk as much as men. Perhaps a "talkative" woman is one who does talk as much as a man. A number of experiments suggest themselves. The total amount of talking time could be measured for men and women in a variety of situations. (In one study women have been found to have a higher word count than men when giving descriptions of verbal displays. The experiment tested only one subject at a time; there were no interruptions.<sup>22</sup>) Here are several focal ideas for other possible experiments: Does the ratio of men to women in a group make a difference in the relative verbosity of members of the two sexes? Is there a difference in the rate at which men and women produce words and sentences? Is there a difference in the number of times men and

women in a group speak? And corresponding to this, is there a difference in the time of individual speeches? How much talking can a woman do before she is labelled "talkative"? This last question might involve a study of the types of sentence construction used, the volume of the voice, and the topics of speech.

Jespersen cites proof from literature to support his discussion of the way women frequently leave sentences, especially exclamatory sentences, unfinished. "Well, I never"; "I must say!" (p. 251).

It may be that women ask more questions. In an article on the role of men and women as represented in children's books, Marjorie U'Ren is quoted on the fictional mother. "She enters a scene only to place a cake on the table and then disappears. Or she plays foil to her husband by setting him up for his line. It is mother who asks, 'What shall we do?' and by doing so invites a speech from father."<sup>23</sup> Do women indeed use more questions and fewer declarative sentences than men? Is this one way of showing subordination, submission to men?

Lakoff thinks women do use the tag-question formation more than men. A tag, in Lakoff's words, is "midway between an outright statement and a yes-no question: it is less assertive than the former, but more confident than the latter."<sup>24</sup> It is used when a speaker does not have full confidence in his or her statement. Instead of a firm declaration, the speaker asks for confirmation, and by being less decisive the speaker leaves himself or herself an out. He or she is willing to be persuaded otherwise. "This

<sup>21</sup> Enid Haupt, *The New Seventeen Book of Etiquette and Young Living* (New York: David McKay, 1970), pp. 101-102.

<sup>22</sup> Meredith D. Gall, Amos K. Hobby, and Kenneth H. Craik, "Non-Linguistic Factors in Oral Language Productivity," *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 29 (Dec. 1969), 871-874.

<sup>23</sup> Mary Ritchie Key, "The Role of Male and Female in Children's Books—Dispelling All Doubt," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, 46 (Oct. 1971), 170.

<sup>24</sup> Robin Lakoff, "Language and Woman's Place," *Language in Society*, 2 (Apr. 1973), 54.

speech convention is terrible, isn't it?" "That law was poorly drafted, don't you think?"

Lakoff hears another question that has much the same effect. Even if the woman is asked a question for which she alone holds the information, she can turn her answer into a question. Lakoff gives this example: "(A) When will dinner be ready? (B) Oh . . . around six o'clock . . . ?" (p. 56). Here, intonation rather than sentence structure has the woman indicate subordination and uncertainty.

I have heard other ways that women, perhaps more than men, have of avoiding stating an opinion directly. "I kinda like that house." If someone points out to her the garage is too small and the fireplace mislocated, she can change her mind without too much difficulty or fear of embarrassment. "That dress is rather pretty." The qualifier gives her an out. Do women actually use tag-questions more than men? Do their declarative sentences contain more qualifiers? In what situations? On what topics?

Lakoff finds a relationship between the tag-question and the tag-order. Women, she says, are more likely to compound a request (pp. 56-57). "Will you help me with these groceries, please?" is more polite than "Come help me" (and politeness, Lakoff believes, is a characteristic of women's speech); and the longer request stated as a question leaves a stronger possibility of a negative response. I have seen no empirical studies which deal with this possible difference in men's and women's speech.

Another technique women might use to talk without seeming to do much talking is to lower the volume and pitch of their speech. We all know that at least in cartoons and novels whenever a number of women gather the resulting talk will be loud and high-pitched. In fact, such gatherings are often called

"hen sessions" and the speech is then called a "cackle." Do women change volume and pitch, depending on the situation and the ratio of men and women present?

Pitch level depends upon the length, tension, and weight of the vocal cords. Women's cords are, in general, shorter, lighter, and stretched more tightly than men's. Pitch level is higher. Again, there seems to be a discrepancy between what really is and what is prescribed. The very fact that etiquette books warn women to avoid loud, high-pitched speaking indicates that performance does not always match the stated norms.<sup>25</sup>

In an article entitled "Down With Sexist Upbringing," Pogrebin recognizes high pitch as a stereotyped attribute of females, closely associated with other undesirable, but feminine, traits. She writes, "Even Sesame Street, despite its noble educational intentions, teaches role rigidity along with the letters of the alphabet. . . . Boy monsters are brave and gruff. Girl monsters are high-pitched and timid."<sup>26</sup> The pitch of the female voice, which is usually higher because of the given physical traits of the vocal cords, is associated with the undesirable trait of timidity.

The higher-pitched voice is not associated in people's minds with serious topics. Mannes quotes a broadcaster giving a reason why in the United States so few women are employed as reporters by television networks: "As a whole, people don't like to hear women's voices telling them serious things."<sup>27</sup> Qualities other than pitch alone are evidently involved here; a handbook for announcers states

<sup>25</sup> See Emily Post, *Etiquette* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1960), pp. 39-40; and Haupt, p. 104.

<sup>26</sup> Letty Cottin Pogrebin, "Down with Sexist Upbringing," *Ms*, Spr. 1972, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> Marya Mannes, "Women Are Equal, But—," in *Current Thinking and Writing*, ed. Joseph Bachelor, Ralph Henry, and Rachel Salisbury (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969), p. 25.

that although women were employed by stations during the war, they were not retained once men were once again available, because "often the higher-pitched female voices could not hold listeners' attention for any length of time, while the lower-pitched voices were frequently vehicles for an overly polished, ultrasophisticated delivery that sounded phoney." According to the handbook, "Women's delivery . . . is lacking in the authority needed for a convincing newscast."<sup>28</sup>

Serious news, then, is not expected from females. It would be interesting to discover if women dislike having women's voices over radio and television to the same degree that men dislike hearing women's voices. Do the relatively few women who do have broadcasting jobs change their pitch and volume for their performances on the air to a greater degree than do male broadcasters? What kind of female voices are hired for broadcasting jobs? At what age does this preference for the male voice begin? And in what situations other than broadcasting? Dillard in writing about the use of peer recordings of speech to teach Standard English to speakers of Black English states: "Sex-grading has to be taken into account: will little boys be willing to learn seriously from records made by little girls, or by boys who impress them as being 'sissies'?"<sup>29</sup> Note that he is not worried about girls being willing to learn "seriously" from records made by boys.

It would be interesting to see if female speech patterns once found in a variety of situations in which women are in the subordinate positions are found in situations in which a woman speaks from

some base of power. Perhaps the male-female division remains the most important consideration. One woman executive "in a top governmental position" has been quoted as saying, "I always try to remember that . . . this is a man's world, and when I have big problems to discuss I work with them in such a manner that the first thing I know they're telling *me* their ideas, which are just exactly what I've been talking about . . . but in a roundabout way through the backdoor . . . it's *their* idea."<sup>30</sup>

This quotation is not of recent date. It would be interesting to try to discover the present speech habits of female executives. If, as our literature suggests, women learn to control their speech to help convey an impression that they are living in the background, does the woman who has obtained a position of some power alongside or over men have these techniques perfected? Or, alternatively, has she other characteristics of speaking which have aided her in obtaining a position of power?

The material presented on the preceding pages indicates that there are many experiments to be run using the larger hypothesis that women's speech reflects the stereotyped roles of male and female in our society, i.e., women in a subservient, nurturing position in a male-dominated world. The tag-question, the relatively large number of questions asked, the intonation which makes a declarative sentence a question, the compounding of requests, the concern with unobtrusive pitch and volume, the triviality of subjects discussed over the air, the roundabout way of declaring ideas—all aspects of female speech, if they do indeed exist (for what I have been reporting is largely folk linguistics) for a significant segment of the female popu-

<sup>28</sup> Quoted by Mary Ritchie Key, "Linguistic Behavior of Male and Female," *Linguistics*, 88 (15 Aug. 1972), 19.

<sup>29</sup> J. L. Dillard, "The Validity of Black English," *Intellectual Digest*, Dec. 1972, p. 42.

<sup>30</sup> Margaret Cussler, *The Woman Executive* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1958), p. 67.



lation, would indicate one way in which the sex roles are maintained.

There appear to be a number of other differences in the speech of men and women that do not seem as neatly categorized according to dominant-dominated characteristics.

Women are said to have a greater intonational range. "It is generally thought that women have more extremes of high and low intonation than do men and that there are some intonation patterns, impressionistically the 'whining, questioning, helpless' patterns, which are used predominantly by women" (Eble, p. 10).

There is some evidence—at least in jokes and novels—of a syntactic looseness in women's speech. (This is of course in comparison with men's speech.) Jespersen writes of the "greater rapidity of female thought" and of the "superior readiness of speech of women"—indicating that the talk is done without much thought. (He offers material from a number of novels written by men as partial proof.) Sentences are not completed, he attests, and women are prone to jump from one idea to another (pp. 250-53). Ellmann writes of the stereotyped formlessness of women's speech as it is represented in the writing of such men as Joyce, Sartre, Mailer, and Hemingway. Molly Bloom and so many women who followed her in literary history have just let it all flow out.<sup>31</sup> The same looseness is illustrated in a *Saturday Review* cartoon (30 Oct., 1971, p. 56) in which a mini-skirted co-ed is saying in class to her professor (male):

If we don't know how big the whole universe is, then I don't see how we could be sure how big anything in it is either, like the whole thing might not be any bigger than maybe an orange would be if it weren't in the universe, I mean, so I don't think we ought to get too uptight about any of it because it might be really sort of small and unimportant

after all, and until we find out that everything isn't just some kind of specks and things, why maybe who needs it?

Jespersen states that the women can answer and talk more quickly because their vocabulary is more limited and more central—that is, women share a common vocabulary while men show more individuality in word choice. If Jespersen's book of 1922 seems to be referred to here an inordinately large number of times it is because he was a prolific and respected writer on language (selections from his books are still anthologized) and because he wrote one of the very few studies available on women's speech. The statements that he makes about women's speech have not been proved or disproved. The support he uses is largely taken from literature.

"Everyone knows that the vocabulary of women differs considerably from that of men," wrote Greenough and Kirtledge back in 1901.<sup>32</sup> Yet one finds very little mention of this supposedly obvious difference. There is surprisingly little interest in linguistic literature even about the use of curse words. Jespersen declares that "there can be no doubt that women exercise a great and universal influence on linguistic development through their instinctive shrinking from coarse and gross expressions and their preference for refined and (in certain spheres) veiled and indirect expressions" (p. 246). Instinctive, he says. Firestone offers another explanation for this particular difference in the vocabulary of men and women: "As for the double standard about cursing: A man is allowed to blaspheme the world because it belongs to him to damn—but the same curse out of the mouth of a woman or a minor, i.e., an incomplete 'man' to whom the world

<sup>31</sup> Mary Ellmann, *Thinking about Women* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).

<sup>32</sup> James B. Greenough and George L. Kirtledge, *Words and Their Ways in English Speech* (1901; rpt. New York: Macmillan, 1914).

does not yet belong, is considered presumptuous, and thus an impropriety or worse" (p. 100).

Men have a further claim to slang words in general. Flexner writes, in the preface to the *Dictionary of American Slang*:

In my work on this dictionary, I was constantly aware that most American slang is created and used by males. Many types of slang words—including the taboo and strongly derogatory ones, those referring to sex, women, work, money, whiskey, politics, transportation, sports, and the like—refer primarily to male endeavor and interest. The majority of entries in this dictionary could be labeled "primarily masculine use. . . ." Men also tend to avoid words that sound feminine or weak. Thus there are sexual differences in even the standard vocabularies of men and women.<sup>33</sup>

In her paradigm of terms for "prostitute," Stanley analyzed two hundred words ("not by any means an exhaustive list") used by men to refer to women who sell themselves or who give themselves away.<sup>34</sup>

This creation and use of slang is considered a healthy activity. According to Jespersen, "Men will certainly with great justice object that there is a danger of the language becoming languid and insipid if we are to content ourselves with women's expressions, and that vigour and vividness count for something" (p. 247). Eric Partridge writes about the "vivid expressiveness" and "vigorous ingenuity" expressed by the creation of the more than 1,200 English synonyms for the word "fuck." He says the words "bear witness to the fertility of English and to the enthusiastic English participation in the universal fascination of the creative act" (Stanley, p. 6).

<sup>33</sup> Stuart Flexner, "Preface" to the *Dictionary of American Slang* (New York: Crowell, 1960), p. xii.

<sup>34</sup> Julia Stanley, "The Semantic Features of the Machismo Ethic in English," University of Georgia, 1972. (Mimeographed.)

The fascination of the act may be universal, but in this country it is not to be spoken about by girls. Here is *The New Seventeen* on people who use "those four letter words": "Boys find it especially repugnant when girls use these words. One boy described girls who use profanity as having nothing better to say" (p. 106).

This material indicates that there is at least one major restriction on what women are supposed to say. Of course, women often object to the slang used by men. But, after all, "Boys will be boys." (Have you ever heard "Girls will be girls"?) There does seem to be a feeling that there is something instinctive—or should be something instinctive—about the way men use coarse expressions and the way women avoid them.

Reik mentions what he thinks are differences in the ways men and women use the *same* words. A word such as "sex," "love," or "home" might have different connotations for the two sexes.<sup>35</sup> These differences could conceivably be found by the use of semantic differential tests.

A number of sources I consulted for this paper indicated that women do not use the same adjectives as men do, or they are used in different contexts or with different frequency. Native speakers will recognize "nice," "pretty," "darling," "charming," "sweet," "lovely," "cute," and "precious," as being words of approval used more frequently by women. As one male student in my speech class said, "If I heard a guy say something was 'cute,' I'd wonder about him." That is, his masculinity would be in question.

I found little mention of the use of adverbs in women's speech, although Jespersen says there are greater differences in the way the sexes use the adverb than the way they use the adjective—and

<sup>35</sup> Theodor Reik, "Men and Women Speak Different Languages," *Psychoanalysis*, 2 (Spr.-Sum. 1954), 15.

he quotes Lord Chesterfield to prove it (p. 249). (Chesterfield objected to the extensive use of "vastly," which he said women used to mean anything.) Several sources, including Jespersen, mentioned the use of hyperbole in women's speech, especially the intensive "so." Lakoff suggests that the heavily stressed "so" can be used like the tag-question to avoid full commitment to a statement. She feels that men use the intensive "so" most easily when the sentence is unemotional or nonsubjective (p. 3n), as in "That car is so beautiful." Since being emphatic is not seemingly a characteristic of women's speech, it would be useful to determine in what situations and with what topics women do use the intensive "so." It might be that it is used in cases where agreement with another speaker is being made. Or where disagreement is unlikely.

Hyperbole perhaps is not a characteristic peculiar to women's speech. Flexner (p. xii) writes that men enjoy using hyperbole in slang. He continues: "Under many situations, men do not see or care to express fine shades of meaning: a girl is either a knockout or a dog." (At the end of this paragraph Flexner says that men like to make themselves the active doer, to use the transitive verb. Here is another syntax pattern to check.)

What I have discussed thus far has been primarily concerned with spoken words. There is some evidence that there are thought to be parallel differences in the written work of men and women. I have already mentioned a study involving the way scholarly writing by women is viewed by college women. Ellmann, in writing about fiction, states the stereotyped dichotomy: the masculine mode of writing contains the properties of reason and knowledge, the feminine mode of writing states feelings and intuitions (p. 158). Ellmann calls this dichotomy

"unreal." Reason and knowledge, feelings and intuitions are difficult things to test for, based as they are on a culture's idea of what is real. But perhaps there are lesser tests to run. For example, is the dialogue different for the sexes in the novels? And do women writers treat the dialogue differently? Much of the support Jespersen used for his chapter on the speech of women consisted of dialogue taken from novels by male writers. Does this dialogue correspond with what is actually said by women and men? A female novelist, George Eliot, used Dorothea's speech (in *Middlemarch*) to indicate changes in Dorothea's feeling of self-assurance as she falls under the dominance of her husband. Her use of intensifying adverbs, for example, persists, but she loses her ability to use figurative speech—or she refrains from using it. As she is unable to get positive responses from her husband, she stops trying to gain agreement by means of her former method of using negatives ("Will you not now do . . .") [which seems a feminine, that is, a submissive construction to begin with]), and starts asking rhetorical questions for which no agreement is required. In her loneliness she uses much hyperbole—to herself. This analysis, by Derek Oldfield,<sup>36</sup> provides an interesting look at the ways a female novelist made a woman use her speech to indicate subordination—so that she was able to still use speech as an outlet.

Poetry, letter-writing, and reporting in the media would be other areas of communication to study. Can the written work of women be recognized by subject, sentence structure, or word choice, or by a combination of these features of formal communication?

<sup>36</sup> "The Language of the Novel," in *Middlemarch: Critical Approaches to the Novel*, ed. Barbara Hardy (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 63-86, *passim*.

This paper has stressed the fact that women as speakers have been largely ignored in communication research, but that there is a sizable amount of information that can be called folk-view: how people think women speak or how people think women should speak. Although these beliefs will make useful bases for hypotheses for research, it must be realized that women are individuals. Researchers interested in studying the speech of women as women (not as part of the category termed "man"—said to be an inclusive term but all too often actually meaning "male") must be careful not to make the error of grouping all women together. Labov and Basil Bernstein have made linguistics conscious of the necessity of recognizing the socio-

economic status of speakers. The origin and race of women speakers might be important factors which bring diversity into the larger category of "women's speech." Age may be another important interacting factor—as religion might be.<sup>37</sup>

Margaret Mead has suggested that we need to try to disabuse our minds of assuming stereotypes to be fact and rather to begin asking some "open-ended exploratory questions" about males and females in our society (pp. 135-136). This paper suggests that some of these questions might be derived from those very stereotypes, the folk linguistics of speech that exist in our society.

<sup>37</sup> This suggestion was made by Fred Hilpert.